



Kids, Yes ... Spouse, No

*Single sergeants talk
about parenthood*

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Without waking her, Staff Sgt. Janaea Commodore lays her 5-year-old daughter, Rosalyn, on a mat in the living room floor of child care provider Kimberly Welsh's home. The Security Forces troop and single parent from McChord Air Force Base, Wash., is used to early mornings and long days. Her 12-hour duty day begins at 4:30 a.m.

Staff Sgt. Janaea Commodore begins her day at 3 a.m. She gets into her uniform, puts her hair up and dabs on makeup. By 3:45 a.m., she lifts her five-year-old daughter Rosalyn out of bed and carries her to the car.

Meanwhile, Kimberly Welsh, Rosalyn's daycare provider, rises earlier than she'd like, stumbles down the stairs to leave the door ajar, then crashes on the living room couch and waits. When Sergeant Commodore arrives, she lets herself into the house and lays Rosalyn down on a mat in the living room. By 4 a.m., she heads to work at the 62nd Security Forces Squadron, McChord Air Force Base, Wash. She has to be "armed up" by 4:30 a.m. and ready to pull a 12-hour duty day.

For Rosalyn and her mom, this is normal.

While her mom is at work, Rosalyn is busy with her own routine. She eats breakfast. Naps. She goes to preschool three times a week. Otherwise, she plays until her mom gets off work — 4:30 p.m. on a good day, after 5 p.m. on most. The mother-daughter family drives home, hoping to fit in some playtime before life's hierarchy of needs kicks in and dinner and a bath get in the way. They read a book or two, prolong goodnight rituals as most 5-year-olds do, and say goodnight until the clock again reads 3 a.m.

The daily grind

While difficult, the Commodore's story isn't unique. Most Airmen, whether active duty, Guard or Reserve, make daily sacrifices serving their country. Single parents, who make up 5.8 percent of the Air Force, add a different angle to the idea of sacrificing for others.

They work at their military jobs, they deploy to the desert and they accept remote assignments just like other military members. But when they aren't at work, they sacrifice whatever it takes to fulfill the role of both mom and dad to run a household single-handedly. Sometimes, this means there's little time for family togetherness.

"I feel horrible. Once, last week, I didn't see her more than three hours in three days," Sergeant Commodore said.

She joined the Air Force in 1997, three years before Rosalyn was born. Now divorced, she feels her Air Force job provides the best income, healthcare and benefits for her family, even if it doesn't supply an overabundance of free time.

On the other side of town, Staff Sgt. Maricia



Staff Sgt. Adam Welzien looks on as his children Alyssa, 5, and Brendan, 7, visit their friend "Joker," at the McChord horse stables. The nondestructive inspection craftsman is raising his two children by himself and is trying to promote a network for single parents at the base.

McLennon, is raising her 5-year-old son, Isaiah, alone.

"When I came in the Air Force it was something to do, but now it's my passion to be in the military," the sergeant said. "It doesn't feel like an obligation. I don't use my son as an excuse for anything."

Instead of trying to play a 'single parent' get-out-of-jail-free card, she focuses on her job as a weather technician with the 1st Weather Squadron, on loan to the Army at Fort Lewis, Wash. For her, this means rotating shift work.

Working 'mids,' Sergeant McLennon has to prepare for work by at least 7:30 p.m. She and Isaiah live in Olympia, Wash., a 20-minute drive from Fort Lewis. Sergeant McLennon is mother-bear protective about where her son spends the night while she works, so she drives another 40 minutes past the Post to Sadawna Harrelson's house — daily. Once she settles Isaiah in, she kisses him goodnight and drives back to Fort Lewis where her duty "day" begins at 9:45 p.m.

By 6 a.m., while Isaiah is still asleep, she finishes work and drives to get him. Some days, they both go home and head to bed. Often, Isaiah will get up and play in his room so his mom can "speed sleep." But on other days, Sergeant McLennon transports him from daycare to preschool at McChord, then pulls into a convenience store parking lot to take a nap before finishing the drive home.

"Sometimes [others in her squadron] forget about me being a mom, but that makes me feel good," Sergeant McLennon said. It's important for her not to be labeled as a single parent, but be known foremost as an Airman, a professional.

"I have never asked for special consideration because I don't think it's fair to everyone else," she added.

As much as the daily grind is just that, surprisingly enough, these moms don't begrudge the lifestyle. They just do what needs doing, love their kids and enjoy being at home, until one day, they'll deploy again.

You need me to go where?

For Sergeant Commodore, who has deployed one time in the last four years, that day is in the very near future. She recently received orders for a one-year remote to Korea. Per her usual *modus operandi*, she outwardly takes it all in stride. She recognizes someone has to go and doesn't expect to be the exception. But inwardly, she's very aware of

the sacrifice.

"I won't be there for his first day of school. Or his first loose tooth," she said.

Fortunately for these single parents, most deployments come with some notice — allowing them to coordinate child care. Usually, this means the kids live with their other parent or grandparents — in another state. Rosalyn goes to her grandparents' house. While his mom is in Korea, Isaiah will live in Florida with his father, an Air Force reservist on a one-year active duty tour.

While separated, these sergeants constantly think of ways to lessen the impact of the distance. Rosalyn's grandparents mark her mom's temporary location on a big world map so she can see it. At night she kisses that spot on the map and says goodnight to her mom. They also write each other letters.

"The best letter was when she kissed the paper with lipstick," Sergeant Commodore recalled.

Unfortunately, no matter how proactive parents and guardians are during the separation, some monumental moments just can't be replaced.

"I haven't had to miss any big holidays," Sergeant Commodore said, looking as if she wanted to knock on a wooden table. "My daughter skipped her first chance to go trick-or-treating so I could be there to see it the next year."

But the timing of Sergeant McLennon's most recent trip couldn't have been worse. "I missed his birthday, Thanksgiving, and Christmas."

Life's challenges

Then there are some Airmen who don't have to deploy. They don't work night shifts. But other trials step in. Some may think Staff Sgt. Adam Welzien, from the 62nd Maintenance Squadron, is fortunate because he's not on mobility status. But that opinion is likely to change when they find out why.

The single father of Brendan, 7, and Alyssa, 5, battles Chron's Disease — an autoimmune malfunction that causes the body to think another part of the body, like the intestines or stomach, is a foreign object. The immune system attacks that part of the body to kill it.

Recently, the illness landed Sergeant Welzien in the hospital for about a week. Other times, he's been in for as long as two. The sergeant is facing a medical review board which could decide to medically retire him; but, nothing about his creativity or energy hints at illness.



For weather specialist Staff Sergeant Maricia McLennon, the only solution to finding three weeks of uninterrupted study time for her first E-6 promotion test was to fly her 5-year-old son, Isaiah, 2,000 miles away to reside with his father in Florida. "Successfully making this promotion would enable me to purchase my first home and have a yard that Isaiah could play in," she said.

"We love to cook as a family. I just bring out ingredients and let them throw stuff together," said the "head chef." When they're not in their kitchen experimenting with new recipes, they're just about everywhere under the sun. At the stables, playing soccer, renting a cabin at the beach, going to a princess dance party. This father should go on "Oprah" wearing a "Superdad" T-shirt.

"It's gotten better," he said of the disease, eyes brightening. "Right now it's in remission."

He's focused on all there is to do in the here and now, and is optimistic about the future.

The Essential relationships

A combination of personal values and benefits lead these parents to decide military life is the best option for their families — so they keep reenlisting.

"A lot of people ask me if I'm going to get out of the military," Sergeant Commodore said. "There are times I do think negative about the military, but I've experienced so much more than a civilian. I'll most likely stay in and retire at 39."

Such decisions are only possible with support of family and friends. Any parent can attest that sharing responsibility for raising a child, whether it's during a 9-hour workday or a one-year remote, requires the strongest form of human trust and bonding. These three parents call on their families for help when in a time of need.

When most people experience hard times, like divorce or illness, they live — or can move — closer to their family for support. But that's not invariably true for military members.

"Most people aren't near their families and don't have the option of moving back to their families and support groups," Sergeant Welzien pointed out.

Sergeant McLennon credits making it through difficult years as a young Airman to the support of a singles ministry at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. Many of the singles were parents and would hang out,

raise their children together, and help each other in a pinch. She still misses them.

When Sergeant Welzien was unexpectedly hospitalized or there's an emergency on an aircraft during non-duty hours, his roommate Eric cared for Brendan and Alyssa. Their brotherly bond gives the sergeant peace of mind in crises. He knows others need the same thing, and has become an advocate for a single's networking system at McChord. He envisions a place where parents can share experiences, provide lessons learned and offer ideas to help manage time and ultimately, give more to their children.

"Families could have picnics and spend time together with their kids," he said. He's also thinking beyond the social aspects, seeing opportunities for base agencies to meet expressed needs.

"I'm trying to coordinate with the base life skills support center. Request nurses to give talks and offer advice, have experts give booster seat inspections," said the man with a plan. "It would grow from there."

The experts speak

These sergeants are only three of thousands of single parents across the military who share similar challenges and success stories. Their advice is simple, yet sage:

- Stay connected. Get involved with a single parent network at your base. If there isn't one — start one.
- Be prepared. Have a plan to turn over financial matters, powers of attorney, and important documents like birth certificates to your designated guardian.
- Know your resources. Find out what home-station and deployed support systems are already in place.

These three sergeants don't need to make excuses — not for serving their country or for giving to their children and raising them in loving, nurturing homes. One thing each of these kids will always have to hold on to, whether their parents are at home or away, is pride and respect for their mom or dad who loves them. ♡

Pulling long shifts? Help's available

Pulling shifts or 12-hour duties? Some bases have an extended duty care program where funds supplement added costs of childcare incurred when Child Development

Centers are unavailable. Licensed child care providers have completed all required screenings, trainings and inspections and have been specifically selected by base family child-care

panels. Parents using this program pay no more than \$2 per hour for additional care. Interested? Contact your base family childcare office for more details.